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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of negative geography--the assertion that any location is better than the one selected--is discussed and ways in which this approach differs from traditional geography methodology are analyzed. Case studies of two citizens' groups which protested the relocation of a city mission and halfway house in their neighborhoods illustrate the negative approach to geographic controversies. This thinking is analyzed and then compared to the usual geographic approach to solving locational issues: with negative geography, citizens who feel threatened by a proposed site for an undesirable facility tend to view more favorable locations in concentric circles further and further removed from their own location, whereas a trained geographer seeks the best or optimum site for a facility based on evaluation of pertinent variables such as proximity to transportation, amount of land available, or population density. Three implications of this negative geographical perspective for geography education are suggested: principles of human behavior cannot always be stated in terms of distance from primary nodes; negative geography provides opportunities to discuss how past inertia and poor decision making complicate geographic decision making in the present; and geography educators have a responsibility to increase understanding of societal issues and to decrease misinformation. Diagrams illustrate key concepts covered in the paper. (LP)

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Negative Geography: Locating Things Elsewhere

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Introduction

Consider this question: Where is the best place to build a new city hall? A professional geographer would seek a solution by examining numerous potential sites and ultimately would recommend a particular place, which would probably be acceptable to the general public. Now consider another question: Where is the best place to open a city mission for transients and derelicts? Again the skills of a geographer are appropriate for determining where to place the facility. The reaction of the public in this case, however, may be less accepting. Numerous individuals and citizens' groups may express their disagreement with various proposed sites. They may not necessarily suggest an alternative that is specific, but will emphatically make this declaration: "Any place but here!" Such a statement expresses an interesting approach to geographic questions because it reverses the usual objective. The geographer's normal conclusion is that a particular location is the best. In contrast, lay persons may insist that almost any location is better than the one selected. This reversed type of response to locational questions is what I am calling negative geography. (Figure 1.)

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In this paper I will first present some illustrations of negative geography. Next, I'll comment on how this approach contrasts methodologically with the normal way of thinking about geographic problems. My concluding remarks suggest the potential importance of these negative locational issues to geographic education.

Some Illustrations

Several locational controversies have appeared in our Lincoln newspaper during the last few months. Namely:

1) Should a cluster of MX missiles be based in Western Nebraska? (Figure 2.)
2) Where should we place facilities for the disposal of chemical wastes accumulated by farmers?
3) What transportation routes should be used to haul nuclear wastes away from the state's Cooper nuclear plant and others that are crossing the country? (Figure 3.)
4) Where in Lincoln should the proposed garbage-burning plant be located?
5) Where should the Lincoln city mission build its new facilities?
6) What are the best sites for half-way houses serving released prisioners and mentally retarded citizens?

To emphasize the nature of the spatial viewpoints, I'll describe the last two situations in greater detail. A problem arose when the directors of the Lincoln city mission planned to move the facilities away from their existing cramped quarters in an area of high-rent land near the center of the city. (Figure 4.) According to the

directors, the criteria for selecting a new site included the following:

1) Proximity to the railroad because this mode of transportation is still used by many of the mission's clients;
2) Proximity to the interstate highway and downtown bus terminal; and
3) Amount of land available for the building, with housing facilities, a playground area, and parking spaces.

The first site chosen seemed to satisfy these criteria, but most residents in the vicinity were very hostile to the idea. Their statements of opposition which focused mainly on the proximity of the proposed site to an elementary school, were effectively expressed through the local neighborhood association. This group functioned like other such community organizations, which in Lincoln are quite active, by encouraging community improvement through citizen participation. In the case at hand, when the members of the Capital Beach Community Association judged that the welfare of their neighborhood was being threatened, they were able to effectively make their objections known. Soon the first proposed site for building a new city mission was abandoned by the mission directors.

The second site chosen for a new building was located in another area, but still according to the same set of criteria. The executive director reported that this second choice also met these additional objectives:

1) The density of residences was low; and
2) Several households in the area had received help from the mission recently. Furthermore, the executive director talked

with many persons residing in the general vicinity and became convinced that there would not be much objection to the proposed site.

It is important to note that persons from the Capital Beach area were satisfied with the newer proposal. According to a newspaper account, the president of the Capital Beach Community Association said: "We feel this is probably as close as you're going to get to an acceptable new place. This is certainly better than having it three blocks from our school. This is a much better place."[1]

However, within two weeks after this second site was announced, the South Salt Creek Community Organization passed a resolution opposing the site, and a petition was circulated. The complaint, again, dealt with the mission's location -- not its existence. The president of the South Salt Creek group stated, according to a newspaper report, that the mission "provides a very valuable service." He went on to say that "if there's anything we can do to find a site not in the middle of a residential area, we'd be glad to help."[2]

Later a public hearing was held at which a petition of opposition with more than a thousand signatures was presented. After the planning commission for Lincoln city and Lancaster County recommended denial for a change in zoning, the site in the South Salt Creek area was abandoned by the mission directors.

Next, the executive director requested that the mayor form a task force to investigate other potential sites. This she did by asking for representatives from the mission directors, from several community organizations and from some business groups. She included personnel from the city planning office, the real estate relocation

office, and the police department. By September the task force reported that they had considered 26 locations but were recommending two as most suitable. The favored one is on land zoned for industrial use and presently being used as a county maintenance garage. When the county moves its equipment to a new industrial park, this land should be available for purchase. Unfortunately, the county's new facilities will not be ready for another two years. So far, there has been no public opposition to this latest proposed site.

My second illustration became a locational controversy when the Lancaster Office of Mental Retardation (LOMR) rented a house in a section of the city called Trendwood. The husband and wife owners had previously tried to sell the house. When they were unsuccessful yet were unable to afford letting it stand empty, they rented it to a group of young men. However, the owners were unhappy with these renters because the men had noisy parties and left junked cars in the driveway. It was at this time that the owners decided to rent the house to be used as a group home. Several neighbors, who were upset about the prospects of having a group of mentally retarded persons as their neighbors, attempted to block occupany by LOMR. Protesters insisted the lease violated a housing covenant that restricted housing in the area to just single families. Using this argument, one neighborhood couple filed a suit in Lancaster County District Court in hopes of blocking the use of the house by a group. When they were unsuccessful at that judicial level, they appealed to the Nebraska Supreme Court, where the case rests at present. Nevertheless, LOMR clients were allowed to move into the house.

One of the reasons LOMR selected this location was the necessity

of placing additional homes beyond areas currently occupied. State law prohibits the location of group homes within a half mile of each other. The traditional areas were filled according to this criterion, so LOMR had to find additional sites in new areas.

When the LOMR group actually moved into the house last February, a newspaper reporter interviewed one of the neighbors who had attended protest meetings and signed petitions. He stated: "A lot of people bring up that we're prejudiced against the retarded because it was rented before and we didn't say anything. And that's true. But it was a temporary thing until the owners could get out from underneath it. ...I'm torn between two things: a moral thing and if it's really necessary for LOMR to rent a house out here."[3]

Again, we can see that citizens seem to accept the need for this kind of facility, but they don't want it to be located close to them, especially close to their place of residence. Their position is summarized simply as this: Not here -- anyplace else is okay.

Some Methodological Comments

This insistence that a facility should be placed "anywhere but here" seems to present a fascinating contrast to the usual geographic approach to solving locational problems. Normally a geographer seeks the best -- or optimal -- site. After evaluating pertinent variables, a geographer differentiates among all potential sites by indicating their comparative suitability. (Figure 5.) Typically, the comparisons can be mapped by isolines showing the suitability of places. In Figure 5, the area enclosed by the isoline of 10 is revealed as the optimal location. And, in terms of more contemporary locational analysis, all the area enclosed by the 8-isoline might be regarded

as satisfactory.

In contrast, Figure 6 is an effort to depict the kind of suitability surface that might be envisioned by a citizen, say Citizen X, who feels threatened by the proposed location of desirable but undesired facility. The map shows very low suitability at one location -- specifically, where Citizen X resides. The surface increases with distance away from that low spot, with the rate of increase lessening outside the citizen's immediate neighborhood.

Note that this depiction applies very definitely to a specific citizen living at a particular place. A map showing the perception of another citizen located elsewhere would have a similar surface configuration, but its nadir would be at a different spot. Thus, this perceptual kind of map contrasts with most maps that are not restricted to a single viewpoint. Since this session pertains to map skills, I might mention parenthetically that this kind of place-specific perspective is a real challenge to cartographers. In addition to the task of making maps of this type understandable for readers, there still remains the public disagreement about the desirability -- or undesirability -- of places. This lack of agreement is one of the elements that complicates solving problems of negative geography.

This negative perspective affects the use of maps in another way. Geographers, planners, anthropologists, and other analysts of areal data may seek answers by superimposing a set of maps having a common base (i.e., sympatry). For example, if the variations in A (Figure 7), B (Figure 8), and C (Figure 9) are examined simultaneously, they can reveal suitable sites. But, a series of maps each with a different

low of unsuitability, when superimposed on each other, will not reveal a locational answer. In other words, when the negative perspectives of lay persons are aggregated, the results provide no geographical solution.

Role of Geographic Education

What does all of this mean for geographic education? I am suggesting three implications.

One: this negative perspective reminds us that human geography does not always reflect the concept of distance decay. As a teacher, I often explain spatial variations in human phenomena by emphasizing their relative proximity to major nodes. Even though this is a primary principle of spatial behavior, we do not not want to neglect the locational motives that strive to achieve avoidance and isolation. Thus, problems of the kind I have described here serve as reminders that explanations or principles of human spatial behavior cannot all be stated in terms of distance from primary notes.

Two: this type of locational controversy provides amost unlimited opportunities to discuss locational inertia and how past geographical decisions complicate finding the best sites for noxious facilities now. As educators we must become increasingly involved with helping students understand how locational decisions today can affect those of tomorrow. Obviously, these opportunities can be attached to the usual questions about optimal sites. But, the emotions frequently associated with negative geography suggest an element of urgency that can be used positively to promote creative thinking.

Three: as educators we have a responsibility to increase understanding of societal issues and to decrease misinformation. This

message is made clear by the geographers Dear and Taylor in their book on locating mental health facilities. They stated that locational theory concerned with public facilities "leads to the explicit recognition that nonuser attitudes to facilities are a vital consideration in locational decision-making".[4] Based on their study in Toronto, the authors discovered that public apprehension about the siting of facilities for mentally handicapped persons often resulted from misinformation about possible effects. They concluded that improved education of the public certainly would aid in receiving nonuser acceptance of future siting of mental health facilities.

Summary

Certain kinds of locational controversies lead lay persons to express what I have termed negative geography. For a variety of reasons, these siting problems will probably continue to increase. I believe they present more than just an interesting methodological approach to geography (and maybe to cartography). I think they also provide an opportunity for geographers to make a positive contribution to education and to society in general by clarifying the importance of past and present decisions about locations.

1. Lincoln Star, 14 Jan. 1983
2. Lincoln Star, 27 Jan. 1983
3. Lincoln Star, 13 July 1983
4. Michael J. Dear and S. Martin Taylor, Not on Our Street: Community Attitudes to Mental Health Care, 1982, p. 4.

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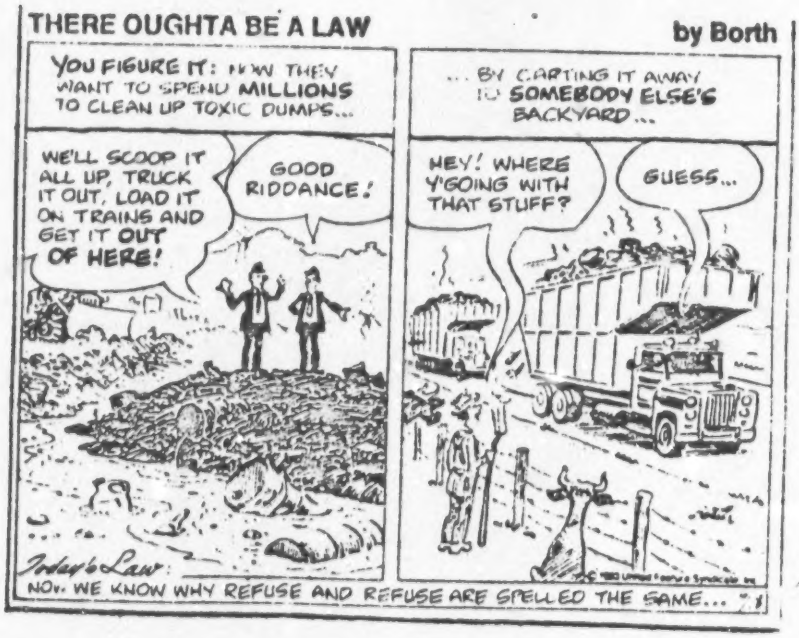
THERE OUGHTA BE A LAW
by Borth
YOU FIGURE IT: NOW THEY WANT TO SPEND MILLIONS TO CLEAN UP TOXIC DUMPS...
WE'LL SCOOP IT ALL UP, TRUCK IT OUT, LOAD IT ON TRAINS AND GET IT OUT OF HERE!
GOOD RIDDANCE!
... BY CARTING IT AWAY TO SOMEBODY ELSE'S BACKYARD...
HEY! WHERE Y'GOING WITH THAT STUFF?
GUESS...
Today's Law:
NO. WE KNOW WHY REFUSE AND REFUSE ARE SPELLED THE SAME...

Figure 1

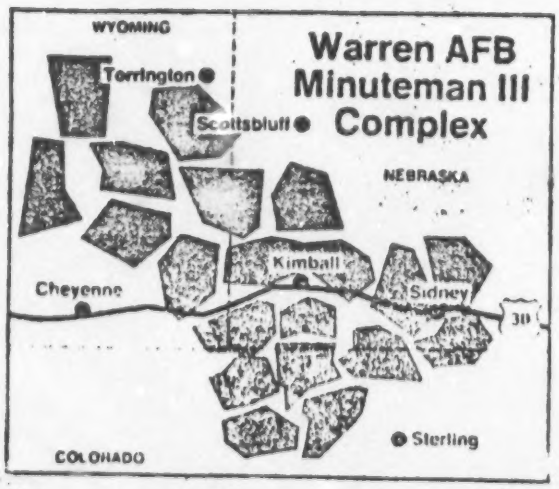

Figure 2. Missile Sites

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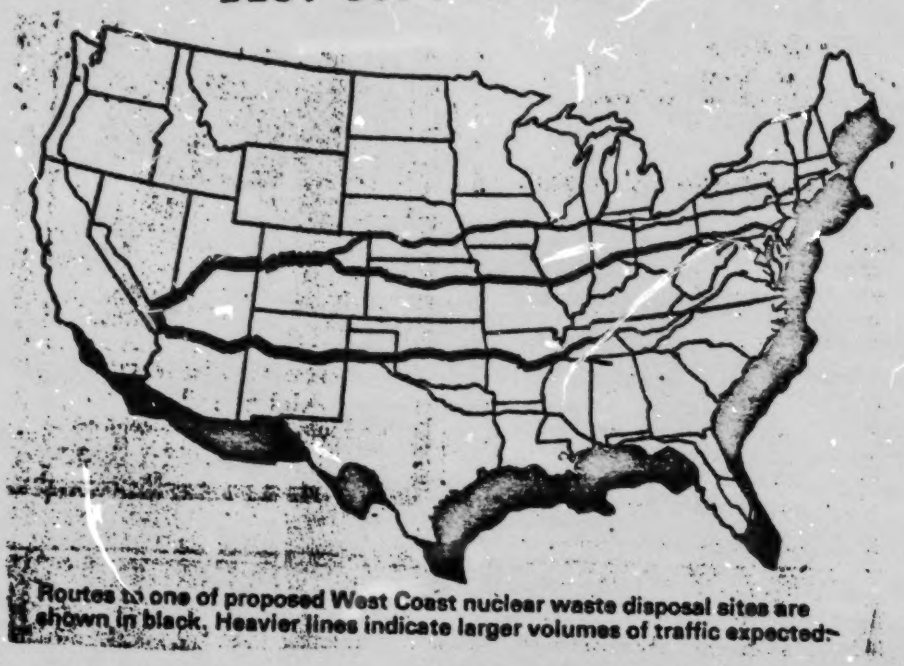

Routes to one of proposed West Coast nuclear waste disposal sites are shown in black. Heavier lines indicate larger volumes of traffic expected.

Figure 3. Routes for Nuclear Wastes

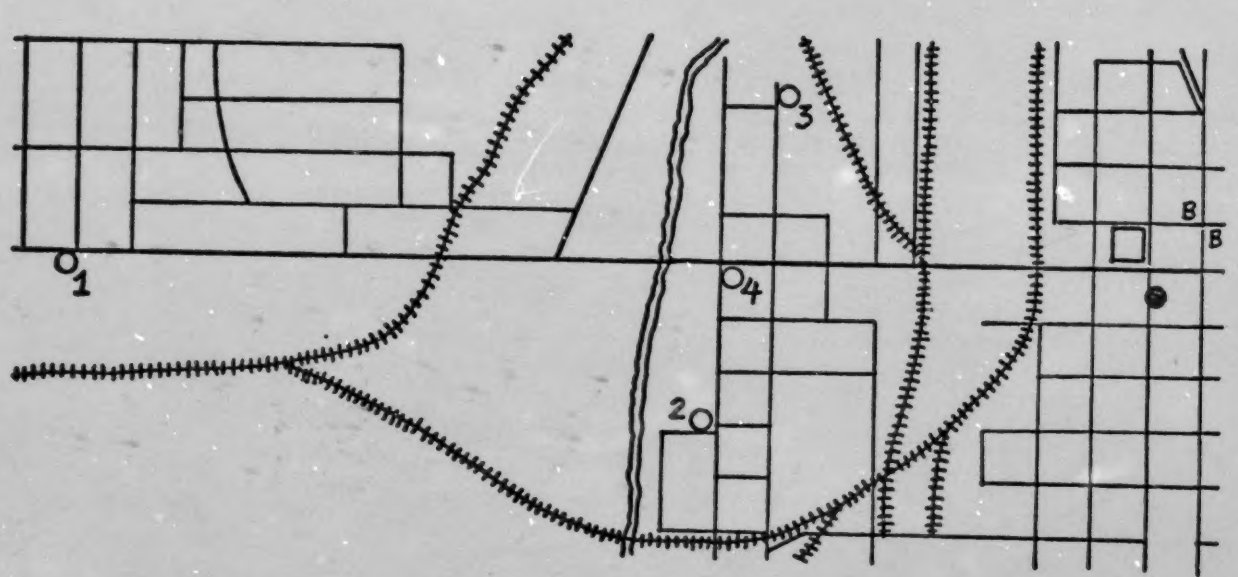


Figure 4. Proposed Sites for City Mission, Lincoln, Nebraska

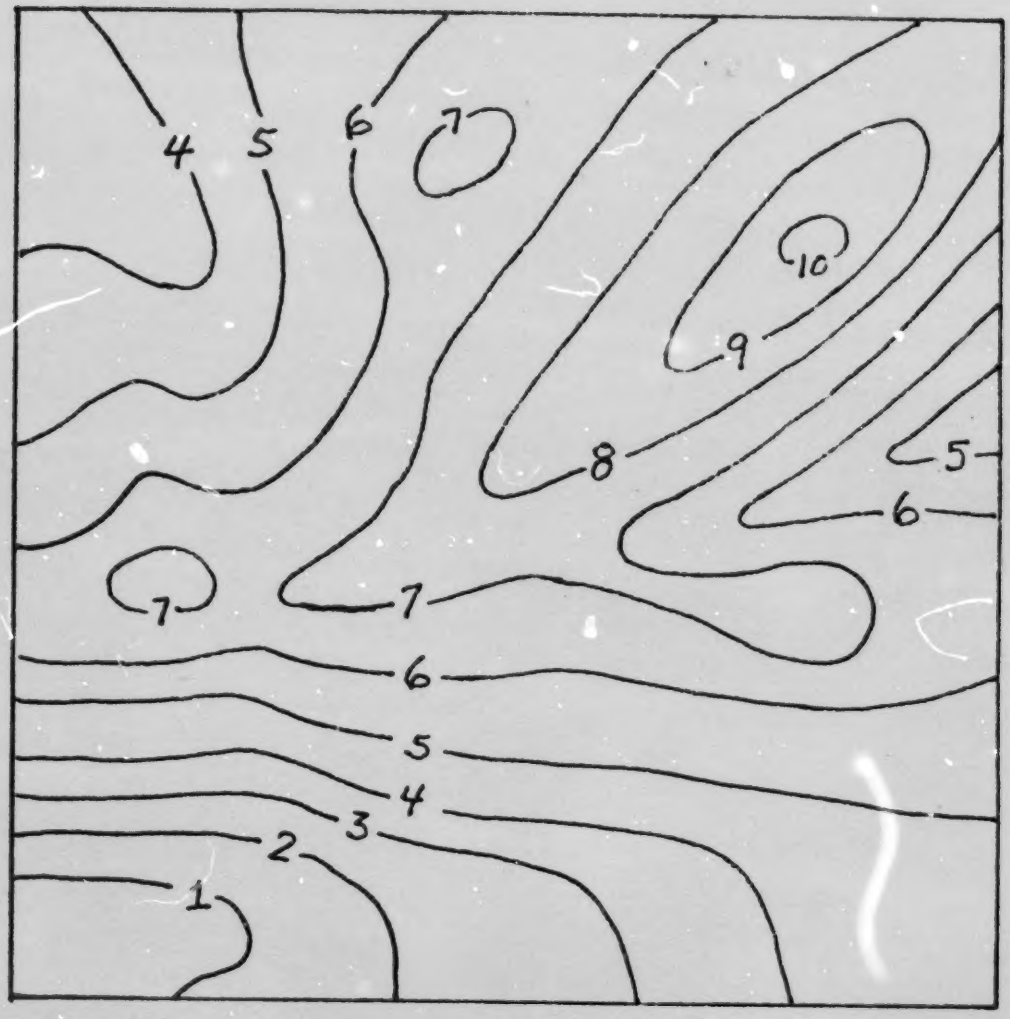


Figure 5. Suitability Surface

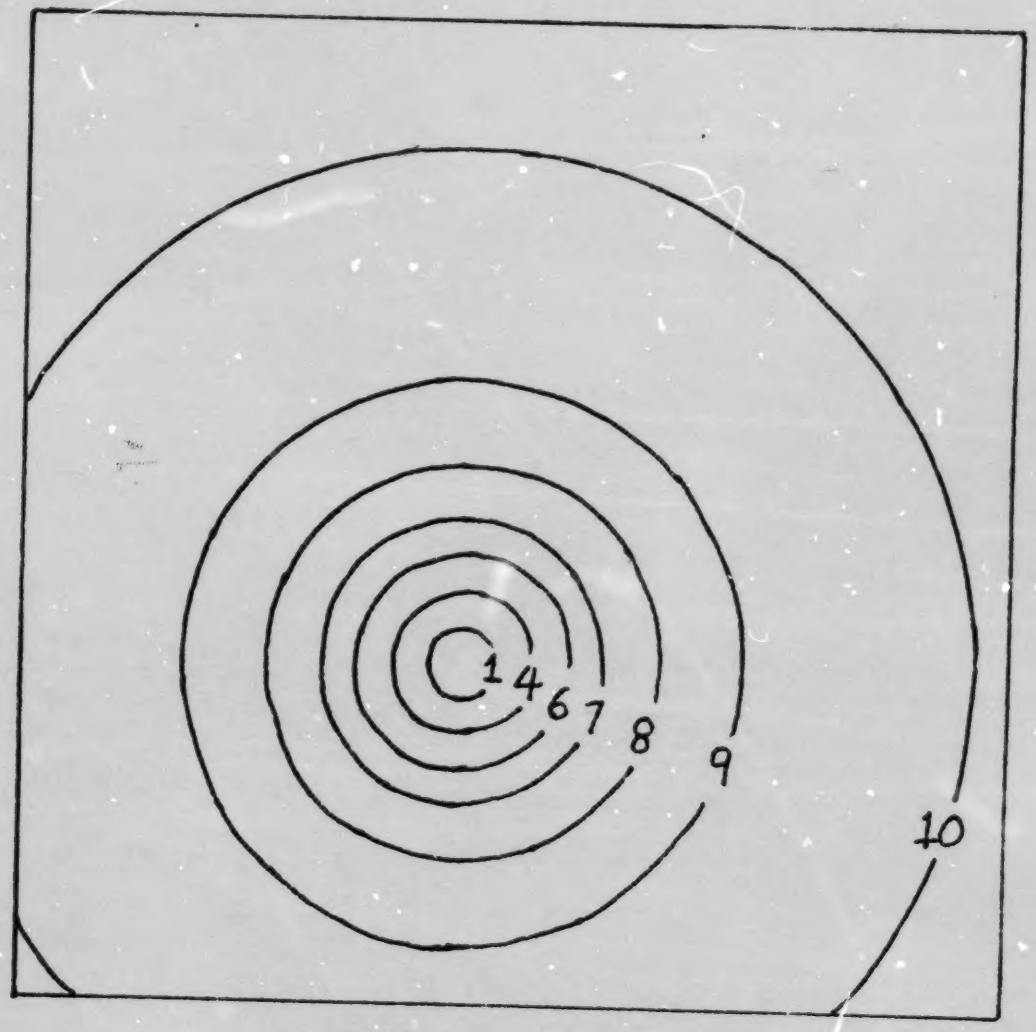


Figure 6. Suitability Surface as Viewed by Citizen X.

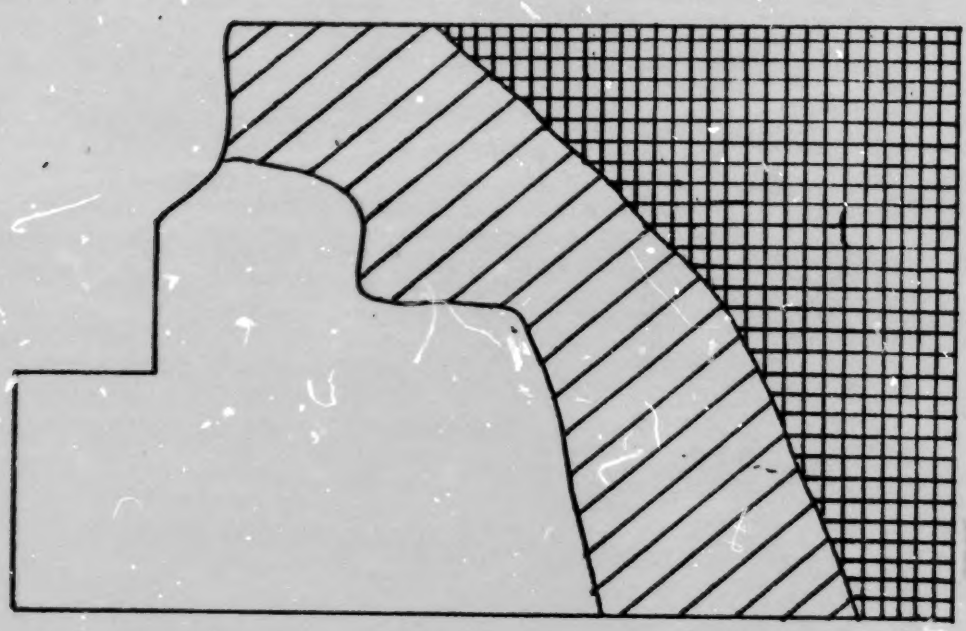


Figure 7. Phenomenon A

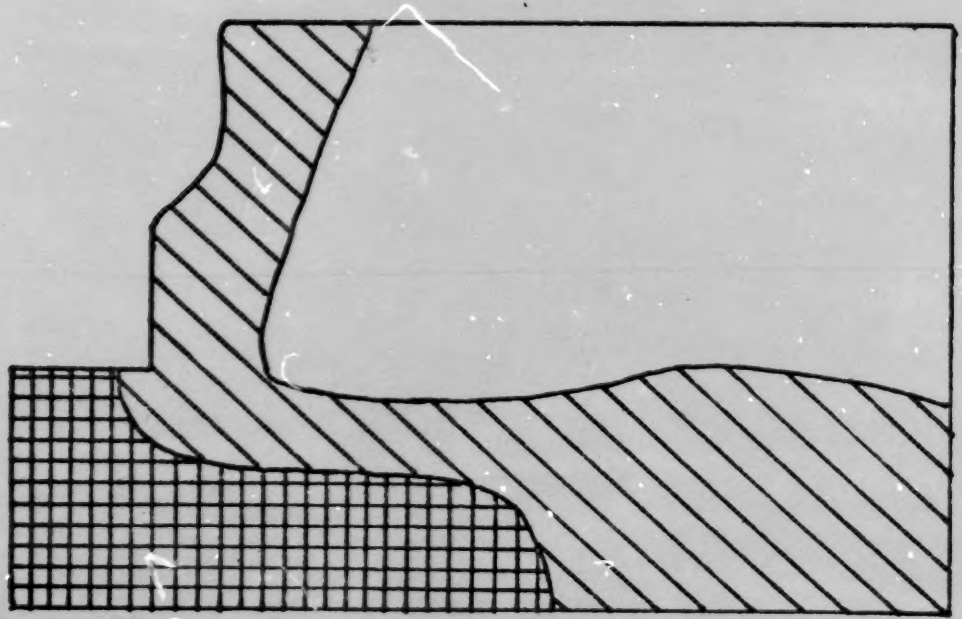


Figure 8. Phenomenon B

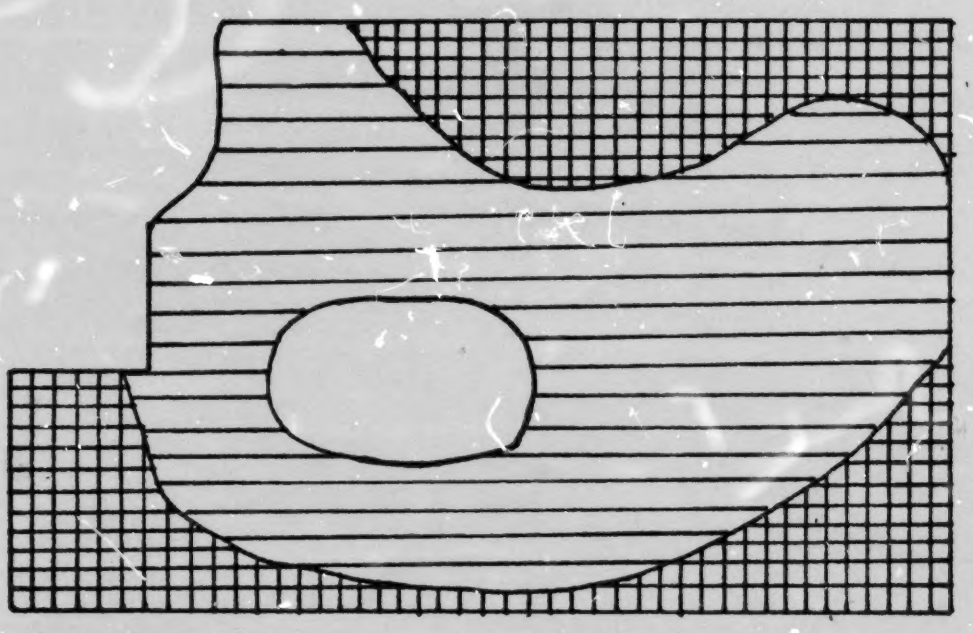
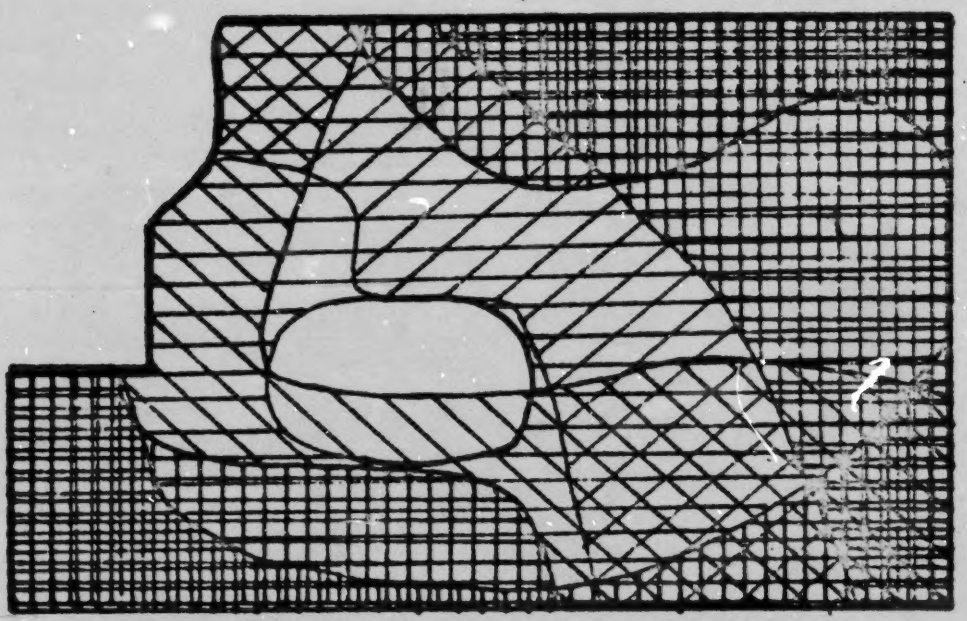


Figure 9. Phenomenon C



Figures 7-9. Phenomena A, B, & C